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ABSTRACT

A method is described for teaching writing to students for whom English is nearly a "first" language by virtue of the nature and circumstances of their use of it. The basic tenet of the approach is that the student can only learn to write well if he has a belief in himself and in the value of his own responses. To write well, the student must grapple with aspects of the language in direct relation to what he has to say. The writer is directed to express feeling and thought on a level of actual experience, not an abstract one. The teacher can help by: (1) suggesting ways to select and order the experiences of the student, and (2) discussing his use of the language in relation to his content. Traditional prescriptive models of writing are concerned with the initial set of rules of the language and with the end product. However, this approach is concerned with the personal and social functions of language as well as with the selection, ordering, and extension of experience and language. Samples and analyses of student writing illustrate the point. (PMJ)

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The person and the process in the product —a focus on the teaching of writing

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One day a fussy pedagogue hired Nasrudin to ferry him across a very wide river. As soon as they were afloat the scholar asked if it was going to be rough.

"Don't ask me nothing about it" said Nasrudin

"Have you ever studied grammar?"

"No" said the Mulla.

"In that case half your life has been wasted."

The Mulla said nothing. Soon a terrible storm blew up.

The Mulla's crazy cockleshell was filling with water.

He leaned over to his companion.

"Have you ever learnt to swim?"

"No" said the pedant.

"In that case, schoolmaster, all your life is lost for we are sinking".

The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin.
Shah, London, 1966.

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I want in the first part of this paper, to suggest a method of approaching the teaching of writing for a small and specialized group—those who can or should take not just some English but 'all the English they can get", and in the second part, to go on to a social and philosophical

rationale for this approach. A clientele such as this would comprise, I suspect, mainly of those learners of English as a second language for whom English is in effect a first language because it is the language that they use with most facility. This would include most students who come from English medium schools; those who come from homes where English is constantly used and whose personal reading experiences are predominantly of English; those who know no other language; and last, but certainly not least, all teachers of English.

I have made this list exhaustive because what I have to say has little relevance to those second language learners who have a first language in which they are (and feel) more competant, and for whom this first language can perform the functions a language should. I do not think either, that it is necessary to insist that those who seek only an elementary working knowledge of the language, or for whom English is to be merely a library language, need to be able to *write* well. They should be able to write correct sentences and perhaps a formal letter or a short technical note, but anything more elaborate or sophisticated can, and perhaps should, be done in the first language.

Those who can take all the English they can get may not form a large proportion of the English learners in India, but they are not *numerically* a small group. Besides, they are an extremely important group because firstly the future of English in India depends, to a large extent, on them, and secondly they are the ones who as teachers of English need to write, recognise and appreciate good English. How can we teach, or rather help, this group learn how to write well?

I think some of the insight and understanding that has emerged from the area of teaching/learning English as first language may be relevant here. But first, we need to look briefly at the historical context.

Traditional approaches to the teaching of writing, have, I feel, been mainly prescriptive. The teaching of writing has in turn been invaded by the grammar and spelling enthusiasts, the literature/liberal arts advocates and finally the supporters of a more modern rhetorical approach. The first category of school masters are typified by those up with whom Churchill would not put. The second reflects a movement to make the subject more "interesting" by introducing a study of extracts from literature supposed to expose the students to the cultural heritage and the values of society as well to act as *models* for good writing. The third approach was an attempt to systematise the teaching of "rhetoric" or "communications skills" [2] (as they are often called) by creating a taxonomy of skills with which it was

hoped the student could be trained to write clear functional prose.—prose whose authorship presumably admitted one to the select coterie of educated users of the language. All three of these approaches have something important and worthwhile to contribute to the teaching of writing, but they have each been unsatisfactory in different ways. What is needed, though, is not a mixture of all three of these approaches but a different kind of approach, a different way of focusing on the problem, based on a larger understanding of the function of language and more particularly of the *expressive* function of writing.

Modern theorists of language agree that we use language not merely to communicate but also to understand, to discover and to feel out our expression. Using language is also grappling with a way of understanding (and different languages, like different media, have different ways of understanding). Language is, in other words, a *medium* and learning to use it well implies exploring the possibilities and limits (preferably in that order) of the medium. This is the basis of my thesis. It implies that at the linguistic level, the selection and shaping, the choice between alternative expressions and models involves discovering how the representational world of language accommodates, reflects and perhaps changes the world of reality and experience as one uses the medium to express it. Communication is only the next step.

This is a commonly accepted idea in aesthetics and in the theory of language, but the implications it has for the teaching of writing have not been fully worked out, although, I must admit, some advances have been made. In order to appreciate the import of these ideas I think we need first to see how similar and related the personal creative modes and other apparently more logical and expository modes are at one level. If we accept the concept of language as medium, then, different varieties of language only represent different ways of handling experience. All these ways though, relate back to the same process—grappling with the medium in relation to the content. Good scientific writing (Can we completely divorce this from good science?) is not made by teaching the students the passive voice and the avoidance of the first person singular and the second person, but by inculcating awarenesses and attitudes towards certain kinds of data. The same holds true of the expository and creative modes.

The pedagogical implications of this are obvious. First, and most important, the student must start not with a set of rules but with a sense of something worth sharing; he must have something to *say*—the rules or skills come later. This implies a belief, both in himself and in the value of

his own response—both of which the traditional English class has systematically eroded, but which must not only be preserved but encouraged. Second, in attempting to share the response, he will be *selecting* some aspects of his experience for scrutiny and ignoring others. He will, then, be *ordering* those aspects so that the response takes on his meaning, shape and emphasis. Third, he will be considering the possibilties that tone, image, register, vocabulary, sentence structure, development, connecting devices and punctuation have to offer. Two of the three stages I have just described are concerned with the idea or the experience and only one with the process of *writing*. This reflects how much stress this approach to writing lays on the experience or the idea and the ability to cope with that as opposed to traditional courses which are concerned far more with the ability to manipulate language. The basic tenet of this approach then, is that the student can learn only by grappling with aspects of the medium in relation to what he has to say. The teacher can help him by suggesting ways in which he can select and order the detail of experience and also by discussing at the revising or editing stage, his success or failure in using the medium in relation to his content. Thus the student sees (and I hope grows to appreciate) [3] the skills of grammar and rhetoric as a *means*, as tools he may use, modify or ignore according to his needs rather than as ends to which his learning is geared. He sees culture and value not as given and static models but as something that evolves and changes with and through his experience. Above all he gains an insight into himself (as creator of his world). Here is where this method wins over the earlier ones.

Often though, well schooled (and therefore "successful") students develop a kind of temporary amnesia when they are asked to do this. Their minds become a blank. They have nothing to say. They feel they have no response or experience worth communicating. They can write objectively at length but only about what others think or have said; only stale thought in stale language. Cliches, both of thought and expression are borrowed from a communal pool and used and re-used to the point where individual expression becomes merely a rehash of mouldy social experience—the person and the freshness both lost. This kind of use of language implies a shoddiness of thought and feeling and a lack of awareness of the current value of the linguistic items they are using. [4, 5] Equally upsetting is the fact that some students believe that such sentimental, decorative, cliche-ridden language is actually *good*.

I feel this problem is particularly severe in India because of historical and social and not so historical and social reasons that have been discussed at length elsewhere before. I do not wish to go into

them again. I agree that this is an enormous problem and by no means easy to tackle. All I want to stress here is that if we are to fight this trend at all, we need to use as a weapon a more fundamental understanding of it. It is not enough to denigrate cliche and sentimentality at the level of *diction*. We should be able first, to show the student how this kind of expression reflects a secondhand mode of thought, a habit of blurring out personal distinctions and passively accepting the (true or false) social formula. And second, to help him at what has been called the "pre-writing" stage–to "see again" to create new relationships, new focuses, new images, new forms. In other words, to make the familiar strange—to distance so that the social response fades and the individual response can take shape. Avoiding cliche is not merely a question of *diction*. It demands a more vigorous personal way of thinking and responding.

This way of approaching the teaching of writing reflects the distinct change in focus between the earlier, more prescriptive models and this one. The former are concerned with the finish of the end product, the latter with the person as well as with the process of selecting, ordering, and extending both experience and language, of which the end product is just one aspect. It sees the process of writing as a way (almost) of selecting the self in relation to the material.

Thus instead of expressing feeling and thought at the general or abstract level, "I find insects interesting" or "I'm bored" or "I dislike my mother" or "newspapers tell lies". the student is directed back to his actual experience, asked to record and revalue those aspects of it that struck him as important and then extend the process to the selection, ordering and refining of language and form in relation to his particular experience.

Here are a few extracts from student writing that will illustrate and perhaps clarify this idea. I begin with an extract from the diary of a 10 year old boy :

> "2nd. Very rainy dull and wet. Today I made a fishing net, not to catch fish but newts. I caught six. I picked out the ones I thought best. I kept three and let the others go. There was lots of newts in the pond t-day I daresay they like this kind of weather.
>
> The three newts I caught, two were a bright orange on the belly with big black round spots all over, the other one was smaller and was a muddy colour and its belly was a bright orange with very small spots on

it. I mean, the spots on this one were only on the belly not all over. The one I got yesterday was a dark yellow ochre.

"All afternoon I sat watching them, I think they are very interesting things".

Notice the attempt to be precise "Two were a bright orange..... not all over"; the drawing together of evidence into a tentative hypothesis "I dare-say they like this weather" and awareness of sound in the vowel values of "dark yellow ochre".

There are none of the skills of rhetoric demonstrated here and the reader will have spotted some mistakes of usage and more of spelling. But the kind of fine control and readability he achieves is remarkable. The detail is a result of an attitude, not just style. Through language he relives and *defines* his experience. He uses words to see more and get it clearer. And when he says "All afternoon I sat watching them, I think they are very interesting things", we agree — because he's told us why. Even the most vigorous pedant will not, I hope, object to the 'comma splice' in the last sentence. In fact, I think its a very effective device here!

Or take this. A 13 year old girl writing about hereself :

I was in trouble again; this time for being saucy to my grandmother. I hadn't thought I was being cheeky but adults seem to see things in a different light. My tongue is always getting me into trouble. It all began, the trouble this evening, when I was fidgeting in an arm chair, I was not interested in the play my parents were watching I made critical remarks and was sharply, told "We're listening to the play not to you". I got up and walked towards the door 'Where are you going?" It was always the same wherever I went I was asked the same question. Why couldn't they leave me alone? I felt a surge of resentment. I came back and stood in front of the fireplace. I Was then told gruffly, "You're blocking Nanny's view".

"If she can't see, she should say so and not want for someone else to do it". There : I had said it, just slipped out before I knew it. My mother sat forward in her chair. Nobody was looking at the television now, all eyes were focussed on me. They were all eyeing me with dislike, probably thinking what a horrid girl I was. I was thinking the same about myself. If only I could take those words back, but I couldn't.

"Go to bed," said my father sternly.

"But it's only just gone ten," I said rebelliously.

"Go to bed," said my father, the tone of his voice developing into a shout. I went to the door, without turning I said "goodnight" to them, I usually kissed them, but not tonight. I felt the tears well up inside me, my nose tingling as I tried hard to fight back the tears.

"Haven't we got names," said my father.

"Goodnight Nan, goodnight Dad, goodnight Mum," I said shortly as if reading a list. Then I went from the room, banging the door behind me.

In the bedroom I sat on the edge of my bed, shivering in the dark. I wanted to have a good cry but the tears would not come. I turned my bedside lamp on and got into bed. With a faint smile I remembered I had some sweets under my pillow. Things to eat always gave me comfort when I was in trouble, I said my prayers, this usually comforted me, but at the moment I felt that He would not want to listen to a horrid girl like me. My mother had often said "Never let the sun go down on your anger." But I was too proud to go and apologize so I went to sleep unsettled and I knew tomorrow would start badly too. I sighed, hardly a day went by without having an argument. "Oh God, please make me less argumentative and help me curb my quick temper and my tongue."

Here the fine detailed observation and the truthfulness to herself and her experience comes from a courage to face up to and accept her self. Recording the event in language has helped her (and us) to distance, balance and perhaps understand more. It has also preserved for her an experience which might have otherwise been lost.

Notice how the narrative is interspersed with dialogue and the control of pace she achieves through this device. The awareness of physical sensation and the ability to record it : "my nose tingling as I tried hard to fight back the tears", the tone "Good night Nan, goodnight Dad, goodnight Mum', I said shortly as if reading a list," as well as the careful analysis of the last paragraph show a remarkable involvement with both the language and the experience. We need to help the student watch for as well as record such moments of personal importance.

This more expository piece by an older student which deals with another kind of experience – his mother, is also interesting :

> ".....It is sad that I should only recently realize the sympathy she has in her, how easily I can talk to her of my feelings, and how sympathetic and understanding she is, and how willing she would be to help me out of my difficulties even though it may be against her own principles. It makes me feel ashamed that I should have less affection for her than I did as a young child. Perhaps it is the loss of my complete dependence on her and the awareness of my mental dependance or the maturity of my emotion and that what I took for deep live and utter devotion in my early childhood was nothing but a superficial emotion. A young child has to love someone and I had no-one else on whom to place my affections. Or may be we have only a certain capacity for affection and though at one time we may lavish it all on one person as soon as others come along we take from the first person to give a little to the others. I do not know the answer, only that all emotions and qualities change, develop or mature and that time leaves nothing untouched.....I am afraid not only of losing my physical youth but any childishness I still have....."[8]

Here the *process* of grappling with the experience had also provided the writer with a form. He takes the reader forward in a conversational tone but also manages to analyse, develop and finally come to terms with the experience. At no point, though, do we find the style self-conscious. And one final example — of a piece of writing where the student has found rich sensory and intellectual images for experience.

> "I feel apathy—I try to kill it with an optimism which I don't believe in. But apathy is hydra-headed — grows on thousand heads the very second, with great pain I've managed to cut one off. Sometimes I feel days pass like heavily loaded camels across the mind's inscape. One is at once the camel, the observer and the desert."[9]

This kind of writing comes when the writer has something to say, something to express (and then communicate) through language. The variety of forms, the control of tone, the pacing, the imagery, the detail, the awareness of the complexity of language in operation are closely tied up with the experience. Without this intimate relationship with content writing can become an empty display : an exercise in demonstrating control over structures and skills. All of us have experienced the boredom and later the horror of marking writing assignments which seem to have been

produced by faceless, mindless, nobodys who can only parrot platitudes or strike poses that are at worst affected, at best elaborately satiric. I feel the current emphases in the teaching of writing have been responsible for much of this. We need to help the student to go back to the truth of his experience and his way of understanding. But in order to do this the student must first be made aware of the vast amount of sensory, emotional and intellectual experience he is constantly undergoing. He must then have the courage and the confidence to structure his response and use language in his own way. He must have the courage to look for his own answer and not for the "right" or "safe" one. This implies of course, being relaxed enough to accept failure. These are the values and attitudes that I believe the writing class should foster. Its subject needs to be not the learning of skills, but "*experience* — where ever language is needed to bring it into a *new* and satisfying order."[10]

II

So much for the method of approaching teaching. I would like also to consider very briefly some of the other social and personal functions that the kind of virile, creative use of language that needs to be demanded of advanced users, has.

Ernst Cassirer in *Language and Myth* says "Myth, language and art began as a concrete undivided unity which is only gradually resolved into a triad of independent modes of spiritual creativity" and that myth and language "do not take their departure from a world of given objects divided according to fixed and finished attributes but they actually first produce this organisation of reality and make the positing of attribute, possible."[11] Since Cassirer this idea has become commonly accepted. We need language both in order to conceptualize our environment and in order to manipulate those concepts. But to be able to do this we must first understand that what language describes is not a final (divine?) order to be accepted and held in reverence but one that man has created through language and therefore one that he can and must play with and change in order to retain his control over his world.

That this activity is essential both to personal and social health and to the health of the language, there can be no question. John H. Fisher in his "Language and Literature in an Articulate Society" says "far from being the frosting on the cake, all forms of play, and especially art and the creative use of language are essential to the development of the human psyche. If they are not formally incorporated into the value

system of a culture, the need for ritual play may break out in such disturbing guises as the drug culture, the rock culture, or war, riot and rebellion engaged in simply to break the monotony of the 9–5 workday and the 50 week workyear." [12] Harvey Cox in his "Feast of Fools"[13] argues in much the same way. He claims that unless the ability and the possibility to seek and find modes alternative to and superceding current ones is preserved and encouraged mechanisation will destroy humaneness as we have known it.

Alvin Toffler, the author of *Future Shock* in his article "English Education and Future Shock" [14] argues "English (class) can offer survival values to students". It can help them absorb new ideas and cope effectively with the change and diversity that the super-industrial age demands—but only if we give up the assumption that "the future is merely going to repeat the present, that it is just going to be more of the same. This message, conveyed *explicitly or implicitly* is not only false, it sets (students) up to be casualities of change." Students, he claims will be able to cope with this kind of accelerated change only if they are encouraged through analogy, metaphor, poetry, art and drama" in the *invention of responses* rather than (in making) rote responses." (my italics) They must be able to imagine and cope with ways of life other than the ones they are familiar with in order to survive in the society of the future.

Teachers of English and sophisticated users of it need to be aware of these functions of language as the basis of their goals in teaching and learning writing. They should therefore, try to keep alive the fresh possibilities, experiences (both familiar and exotic) have and stress the role language has to play in discovering the quality and the implications of experience.

Learning to use language will continue so long as we are open to new experience and are willing to modify our use of language to accommodate the experience. But if language use is divorced from experience it will degenerate to the kind of sick exercise in the exhibition of prowess that we are all familiar with. And "in that case school master, all your life" (not to mention your students' lives) "is lost for we are sinking".

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1. This means that what I have to say about English teaching for this particular clientele is also relevant to all first language teaching.

2. Readers who are not familiar with this area will find a summary of the current rhetorical prescription interesting. One must (essentially) write an appropriately refined topic sentence: develop that sentence into a unified paragraph and connect it coherently (using link devices) with other topic sentences developed into other paragraphs taking care to ensure correct emphasis. One must then add an introduction and a conclusion stating that repeating what has been said in the "middle" without obviously appearing to have done so.
3. Linguists have long been aware of this perspective on rhetorical "rules" Gleason *(Linguistics and English Grammar)* says the teacher should aim at "increasing sensitivity to structure and alternatives in structure" and at "increased awareness of situation, intention, audience and the correlations with these of variations in language".
4. For a lively and biting discussion on this see Orwell : *Politics and the English Language*, and of course, his 1984.
5. See Cleanth Brooks : "The Uses of Literature" in *A Shaping Joy*, where he argues that one of the functions of literature is to safeguard the vital cutting edge of language. His analysis of Eichmann's last speech is illuminating.
6. Student 1 Quoted by John Dixon in *Growth Through English*.p. 5.
7. Student 2 Ibid., p. 50,
8. Student 3. CIEFL
9. Student 4. CIEFL
10. John Dixon *Growth Through English* Report on the Dartmouth Anglo-American Seminar, OUP.
11. Ernst Cassirer *Language and Myth*, Trans. Suzanne Langer, New York, Dover Publications, pp. 66-67, 98.
12. John H. Fisher: *Truth Versus Beauty: Language and Literature in an Articulate Society*. NCTE Distinguished Lectures Programme, 1972.
13. Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools*, SCM, 1971.
14. Alivin Toffler: *English Education & Future Shock* in English Education, 3, Spring 1972.
15. An interesting attempt to work out the pedagogical detail of this approachis the Freshman textbook by Kaufman and Powers: *The Writer's Mind* Prentice-Hall, 1970.
16. Gordon Rohman and Albert O Wlecke: *Prewriting. The construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing, 1966*
17. The possible implications for teacher training are explored by David Holbrook in *The Exploring Word*, 1967 and in *Secret Places*, 1963.